

THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

Anniversary Sermon, by the Reverend A. Powell Davies, D.D.,
Minister of All Souls' Church, Unitarian, Washington, D.C.,
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Whenever it is proposed to discuss the church and the world, there are those who will say that they know what the world is--but what is the church? It would be better, I think, if they felt uncertainty in both cases. For the real world is as difficult to know as is the true church, and it is because the majority know neither very well that civilization is threatened with destruction.

To illustrate the difficulty of knowing the real world, I shall, with your indulgence, use myself as an example. When I was a boy in an English school, I made the following agreeable discovery: that by immense good fortune I had been born into the finest home in the finest city in the finest country in the world; yes, and I attended the one true church and heard sermons by the one best preacher precisely at a time when churches were truer and preachers better than they had ever been since life began. Moreover, this was only the beginning of the matter. For it was also revealed to me that in all contests, struggles, quarrels and wars, the English had always been right--except where they had been opposed to the Welsh. In this latter case, I found that everything was still all right because the Welsh, although frequently defeated by the English, had invariably somehow turned defeat into a subtle kind of victory, so that it was better to be Welsh and defeated by the English than to be of any other stock and undisputed conquerors.

It was furthermore disclosed to me that people who spoke English had been appointed by God to rule the world. The appropriateness of this arrangement was indisputable since wherever English was spoken, justice was exalted and respectability enforced. Who could deny--the evidence was everywhere conspicuous--that English-speaking suzerainty had ended the dark night of the past and ushered in a universal morning of enlightenment, the glorious chanticleers of which were King Edward the VIIth, Mr. Herbert Asquith and Mr. David Lloyd George.

It was also pleasant to be told that across the ocean, traversed by great British liners--and by a few other ships of no account, except that not having been built in Britain, they were dangerous to travel upon--there was another nation that spoke English, even if imperfectly, namely, the Americans. It was true that these other English-speakers had made a little trouble for the home country from time to time, but this was all within the family and entirely for the best. Just as it was certainly a good thing that the Americans had killed off most of the wild Indians and put their territory to so much better use than when the Indians had it. Indeed, I was not at all surprised to learn that the Indians were rather glad to have been killed, once they understood the matter properly, and that the few survivors, far from wanting things the way they used to be, begged to be placed under the protection of their exterminators and put on display at national festivals and wild west shows.

It also seemed natural that, second only to the British, the Americans made excellent merchandise. "Goods" manufactured elsewhere were not good and those manufactured in Germany were particularly poor as evidenced by the letters stamped upon them, "D.R.G.M.", which meant "disgustingly rotten German make." Curiously enough, people like the Germans and the French composed good music and painted famous pictures, and they even had railway trains, but of course, they did not run them on time and some of them were far from safe. As to more remote peoples, like those of India, China or Japan, they were just naturally queer--queer in the sense of being incomprehensible and queer because they were comical. Gradually, all these queer people were being made more normal, and it was for the purpose of hastening this beneficent process that, in Sunday School, we took up our weekly offering for the foreign missions. We English-speaking, Christian, white people were going to make the whole world good: that is to say, we were going to make the rest of mankind almost as nice as we were.

Such was the world of my childhood. And such, dear friends, with one variation or another, was the world of your childhood. Even if you were so fortunate as to have been born into a more cosmopolitan environment, or so richly favored, shall we say, as to have been brought up a Unitarian, the advantage is barely worth mentioning. It is only by unceasing effort, strenuous from first to last, that any of us breaks down the prison of his provincialism. Mostly, we merely cut windows in it, to look out briefly on the larger world before returning to the comfortable shelter of established habit. What else do our legislators do? Our industrial leaders? Our men in public life? From time to time, they see the true dimensions of reality. They recognize the need for bold, adventurous undertakings. They know that only so can we survive. But it lasts only for a moment. Then they retreat into the unreal world which molded their mentalities and shaped their characters.

Meanwhile, the real world is the total world, a world of wars and revolutions, a world vast areas of which are dark with wretchedness and bleak with destitution. It is a world in which the Civilization of the West is advancing outwardly and retreating inwardly, as the civilization of ancient Rome once did, achieving all the grandeur of its late imperial phase while the life was draining out of its culture. In spite

of our ruinous wars and the surrender of a large part of the earth's population to communist enslavement--in spite even of our preparation for future wars and our preoccupation with fantastic weapons of incredible destruction--we have made impressive outer progress. To the extent that civilization is food production, engineering, communication, architecture, medicine, functional science and the like, our advance has been spectacular. But in faith and purpose, moral courage, sureness of resolve, we are retreating. Indeed, our retreat is threatening to become a rout. For even now, we are refusing--all too many of us--to live in the real world. We are unable, without something that we do not have, to cope with the requirements. And it is this, as I shall now attempt to show, that the church--the true church--should supply.

When those who have been too confident that they understood the world--meaning by it their own provincial world--begin to see how mind-stretching and how imperiously demanding the actual world has now become, they feel the need for moral reinforcement. But, as I indicated at the beginning, they are uncertain of the church: what they see is not one church but many and it seems to them that the confusion of the churches rivals that of the world.

They discover the worldliness of churches--not worldliness in the larger sense of belonging to the total world, which, in its predicament they should exist to serve, but worldly in being part of the provincial world, the false world, the world of intermingled fact and fantasy, and in sharing its blindness to the actual need. They may even discover that a church can be a substitute for religion, just as drawing-room chatter is a substitute for genuine discourse. You can go to a church with very little religion and yet lose the little that you have. You can go to a church and find it hostile to religion, as attested by the haste of churches to translate their prophets into martyrs. You can find, in short, that a church is a very difficult place into which to introduce religion--or if introduced, to keep it there.

That is why we must speak of the church rather than of churches. And we must mean by it what Samuel Longfellow meant in his hymn, "One holy Church of God appears, through every age and race." The church whose priests "are all God's faithful sons, to serve the world raised up;" the church to which truth is a "prophetic gift" and whose task is to "redeem the evil time." This church above churches--though also, if we will it so, the church within churches--is limited to no one sect, nor even to a single province of religious culture. It is not local but universal. It may be Christian to Christians and to others call itself by other names. It may express itself through institutions or be found outside them. It becomes corporeal wherever justice finds embodiment and is manifest wherever high religion enters into life. Its identifying mark is righteousness. It calls the churches to repentance with the same voice with which it challenges the world. Its claim was long ago established: "Let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream." Its salvation is not in tending altars but in righteous deeds. Its redemption is not through something still to come from God, but from what already has been given--abundant but unused resources. This is the church in distinction from the churches: the prophetic, living church of "every age and race."

It is not--I repeat--confined within a single province of religious culture nor is it derived from a particular supernatural revelation. It began with the beginning of human society. Little by little, as animal man with human potentiality stirring within him built up traditions and restraints, there came from the inner mystery of his being the nurture of his moral consciousness. As naturally as he knew the changing seasons, he came to know good and evil. Gradually, by a development just as real and just as compelling as the one which had formed him physically, giving him his prehensile hands, his distinctive brain and his upright posture, he arrived at concepts of justice and righteousness and discovered the possibility of sympathy and kindness. Prophets arose--men of sharper percipency and keener insight--to tell him that he must "do justly and love mercy", and his developing human nature, no matter how much he rebelled at such difficult demands, confirmed that what the prophets said was true. He himself wanted justice; he needed mercy. What he asked from others, he must also ask from himself. And so in all the great religions we have the Golden Rule. This is how the church emerged: out of man's struggle to realize his human possibilities. Its story, of course, is the entire story of religion--indeed, it is the central theme in the story of man.

Yet, no matter how often this story is told, there are those who fail to see that only by depending upon natural religion do we understand that religion is natural: that is to say, a development within nature. If man is a part of nature, so is human nature and nothing human can transcend it. It is vital that we understand this if we are to know the realism of the moral crisis which is the cause--not an accompaniment but the cause--of the world's predicament. It is vital, also, that we see that when "supernatural" religion is substituted for the religion that is basic to man's natural evolution, the moral is always subordinated and an escape is provided through a system of "salvation." Instead of having to redeem his wrongs through righteous deeds, man is granted a spurious forgiveness. Instead of being required to realize the fullest possibilities of his human nature, he is permitted to confess his helplessness and rely upon the mercy of God. But the truth is that he is not helpless and he needs nothing from God that he does not already possess.

The true and prophetic church, therefore, as it views the world's predicament, will insist that there is no solution that does not come through righteousness. The question at issue is simply this: will we now accept the obligations of a fully human nature? It is to this decision that mankind has been moving from the beginning; postponement now is no longer possible: the culminating moment has arrived. In the plainest and most literal sense, we are morally evolved to the point where not only civilization but mankind itself must make a crucial choice. If we will not choose righteousness, we have chosen death. Only if man can rise at last to his fullest moral stature shall he be able to control the fearful agencies of devastation which threaten his annihilation. The supreme, climactic product of the mind of man--the loosing of the power of the atom--is at the service of our lower nature unless our moral nature can subdue it. This means, however, that the entire world must be ordered to that end. There is no means of controlling atomic weapons which does not require that the life of men and

nations be re-molded by the claims of righteousness. In all respects, conditions must be created in which justice, mercy and benevolence can live and flourish. To prevent a war which would destroy us, we need a world which does not turn to war, a world in which hate and violence, resentment and bitterness, cleavage and dissension have no cause to exist. And this is the task of the prophetic church as it faces the existing world: to proclaim that nothing less than truth is true enough to guide us, that nothing less than justice is just enough to turn aside the threat of retribution, that nothing less than righteousness can end the wrongs that tear the world apart. And then to say, in the words of Deuteronomy, "See, I have set before thee this day, life and good, and death and evil." For that, indeed, is now the literal choice.

This is the task of the true, prophetic church. But it will not be allowed to attempt it, unhindered. Those who are unwilling for fully human obligations will oppose the church's mission even at the cost of universal devastation. Resistance is already far advanced. First, there is the resistance of communism, which is attempting to evade the moral issue by crystalizing human society at a sub-human level. By coercion when it can, by conspiracy where it must, the communist revolt against the world's advance towards a full humanity is directed against the true, prophetic church. Communism is ultimate evil and the church's mortal enemy. It is ultimate evil because it surrenders the possibility that man can rise in freedom to his fullest moral stature and because it condemns him to debasement, an enslaved unit in a dehumanized society of serfs. Communism is the church's mortal enemy because it subverts righteousness in the name of righteousness and evilly exploits evil while wearing the mask of goodness. Communism is the refusal of the morality the church exists to uphold. The persisting communist--I am not speaking of those who were deceived and have left the communist conspiracy--is therefore by his own decision the enemy of the church. His treason is not only to his country but to all humanity.

Again, I say, communism is ultimate evil: the ancient evil with which the highest in human nature has always been in conflict, and which now would face us with a choice between enslavement and destruction. Even these, however, are false alternatives. A conspiratorial society, even though it conquered the world, would go on conspiring. Out of its schisms would come the rivalries which led to war and doomed the world to sure destruction.

Only by rising to the fulness of his moral stature--which he cannot do except in freedom--can man be equal to the problems he must solve. The practical requirement and the spiritual necessity are one. Righteousness is the claim of the church, righteousness is the need of the world, and communism is the enemy, barring the way to its achievement.

But communism is not the only enemy. The same rejection of righteousness, the same subversion of our moral nature which has made communism what it is has also produced some other enemies. Just as communism has mocked justice by false appeals to justice, and democracy by spurious assertions of democracy, so there are those who are using communism as the excuse not only for refusing the claims of righteousness in a world which cannot survive except through righteousness, but

even for renouncing the former decencies of public life without which we cannot remain a civilized community. If they are allowed to continue as they have begun, these men of perfidy will so weaken us morally and so confuse and degrade us that we shall be unequal to the struggle for survival.

And now, since it is the church in America which is our immediate concern, and since it is the task of the church to condemn evil and proclaim righteousness--and since the time is urgent and the sands of history are running out--I shall apply explicitly the gospel I have preached.

The United States is becoming a nation of fear. Its capital city, in which I live and which I intimately know, is a city of intimidated people. The possibility of being accused--however falsely--of communist associations is making fear obsessional. Not only ordinary workers for the Government, but those in high positions--indeed, the Government itself--is now afraid. There is no chance at all, none whatever, that a frightened nation will survive.

Most recently--if I may relate a personal incident--the State Department, doubtless the most fear-ridden of the agencies of government, was reported to have banned my books from overseas libraries, even though they are books against communism. The fact that I have been against communism all my life does not count. It is the fact that I have criticized the untruths and the injustices of the investigating Committees that is given weight. I am what is called a controversial person: that is to say, one who does not keep quiet in the presence of evil. And so it was reported--and for a significantly long length of time was not denied, although the newspapers for hour after hour maintained their inquiries--that my books are banned. That, however, may be a minor matter, for I am only a parish minister who, as a supplement to preaching, has chanced to write some books. Of far greater importance is the fact that the books of Judge Learned Hand, one of the most humane and literate jurists of our time, were also reported banned. So were the works of Mr. George Gershwin--and, to make the catalog complete, the speeches of Mr. Adlai Stevenson were under investigation. It is true that Mr. Wadsworth's story, given out three weeks after he had left the State Department, has not been confirmed by the State Department. It is also true that Mr. McLeod, Senator McCarthy's friend and the State Department's Security Administrator, declared last Friday evening that he wanted no more to do with checking up on American authors and composers whose works are used in the Government's international information program. But I am not impressed. Denial is not enough; there should be some explanation.

So much for this recent incident. But there is something more I want to say before concluding my prepared sermon. These men who say that they are not against the church, although they have slandered churchmen of high character and wide reputation--as in the case of Bishop Oxnham, who was called with incredible perversity a servant of the communist cause--they really are against the church. They themselves are not fully aware of it, but since the church--the true and prophetic church--must always stand for righteousness and since these men do not want to be handicapped by the claims of righteousness in the

procedures with which they further their aims, they are sure to view the church with hostility. Like all other tyrants, they will see the church as standing in their way. The fact is that they want anti-communism to be a total ethic--which it is not. They want us to believe that if you are against communism it does not matter whether you are just and truthful, or whether you uphold the decencies of American life. And there are those who applaud them--who accept this treacherous reversal of our moral values.

This is the distance we have already travelled. I do not hesitate to say that, at present, no major proposal in foreign policy which was disliked by Senator McCarthy would be advanced by the Government. It is no longer a question of whether the Senator from Wisconsin will some day rule the United States; to a great extent he is ruling it already. The Secretary of State might well be called his administrative assistant. This is the distance we have already travelled.

What does it mean to the church? It means that these men of fear, who live by fear, who rule by fear, and who would destroy us through fear must be vanquished by men of faith. America's faith in freedom, in justice, in the rights of man, is actually religious faith. The faith of Jefferson and Lincoln, men of conscience, men of moral principle, men of soul--what was it but religious faith? It was a faith fostered by what I have called the true and prophetic church, the church that calls for righteousness. It must still be fostered by that church. And if we think that we who meet here tonight are endowed by precious history with the privilege of standing in the vanguard of that church's mission to the world: if there are heroes we revere who led the way in the times gone by and if we still adhere to what they held to--then our task is plain. We must condemn the evils that are withering the once fair promise of America. We must call aloud for righteousness. Our courage must be inexhaustible, and our endurance limitless: until our faith has vanquished fear.

That is the claim upon us--we who would serve the living church in these days of doom and destiny. It is to this that life in all its age-long march has come: that here and now, in the valley of decision, we shall achieve at last the stature of a full humanity--the pain and toil and the power and glory that are given to the children of God.

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Prayer: O God of men and nations, show us yet again how much stronger we are than anything that can happen to us: and remind us that though we shall never rise higher than our faith and courage, we need never fall below them. Amen.

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